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# The Signs of Post-Colonial Identity: Ballooned Words and Drawn texts in Sarnath Banerjee's Graphic Novels

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to investigate the linguistic and textual strategies through which graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee expresses forms of post-colonial identity against the backdrop of contemporary multilingual India<sup>2</sup>. Far from being a trivial, marginal genre, comics – with their captivating blend of words and pictures – represent an ideal tool for the expression of postcolonial and postmodern discourses of identity that the author wants to convey. Graphic novels chart the tension between the verbal and the visual dimensions of communication and work as multimodal texts in which various semiotic elements cooperate to create and organise meanings. To date, Sarnath Banerjee has authored three graphic works: *Corridor* (2004), *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) and *The Harappa Files* (2010), which benefit from a variety of different styles and techniques and employ signs as hybrid communicative codes, with iconic, symbolic, indexical features to voice contemporary anxieties and ambiguities.

Comics are not an autochthonous genre in India, although traditional Indian iconography and pictography is particularly rich and elaborate, and yet thanks to their interactive nature, which allows the fruitful combination of textual characteristics and resources, they perfectly fit the cultural landscape of a multilingual country like India. Post-colonial graphic novels are therefore taken as examples of multimodal texts, in which language through abrogation and appropriation reflects the value of local practices, according to Pennycook's vision (2010). Moreover, the rhetorical strategies that Banerjee uses to construct his texts are in line with the idea of language transformation in post-colonial contexts theorised by Ashcroft (2009), who highlights the translation of local cultures via hybridised varieties of English.

This paper will focus on how the idea of identity – and its possible crisis – is visually and linguistically portrayed as a main preoccupation in Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novels. The examples I intend to examine belong to the post-colonial context of India and have been chosen to illustrate the different modes of construction of identity traits and cultural values. Placed within an expanding web of intertextual references, these graphic narratives suggestively play with the apparent ambiguity of the language of comics and interrogate the shapes of identity in a double feeling of fragmentation of texts and plurality of voices, stories, memories of the self in multicultural and multilingual India today.

## 2. Graphicing the wor(l)d

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger locally-funded research project titled "Rewriting Stories through Graphic Novels", which is also connected with a scientific poster titled "Dilemmas in Multimodal Space: Ballooned Words or Drawn Texts?" that I presented at the AIA Conference "Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Dilemmas, Ambiguities, Directions", held at the University of Rome Tre in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Various scholars (Eisner 2008; Saraceni 2003; Wolk 2007) have discussed the differences between comics and graphic novels. In the present paper, however, for terminological convenience I have chosen to use the terms "graphic novels", "comics" and "graphic narratives" as interchangeable.

## 2.1 Meanings and signs

The idea of graphic representation of stories has ancient origins. The relationship between pictures and words evokes the comparison of poetry and painting: Wolk (2007: 126-7) points this out by referring to classical poets and rhetoricians such as Simonides of Keos and Horace, and their discussions about different genres and ways of representation. Verbal language and graphical depictions have distinct characteristics, but they both share a large potentiality of expressing meanings and ideas, and when they work together the power of representation turns out to be particularly salient. Indeed, we could say that with graphic novels words and pictures collaborate in a semiotic relationship so as to create a new mixed language, in which words and signs bear a particular meaning or reference.

As Saraceni (2003: 5) highlights, the main features of comics concern the use of both words and images, and the textual arrangement of selective representational parts into cohesive and coherent progressions. The different scenes with their linguistic and pictorial components are collocated within frames called panels and while they may, apparently, seem still or frozen moments, they are actually part of the narration flow and as such they compress information and aspects of the story being narrated. Another important element in the architecture of graphic novels is the gutter, namely the blank space between the panels which connects the different scenes and condenses the storyline inasmuch as the reader has to interpret not only pictures and words, but also the ‘invisible’ presence of meanings and developments. Saraceni sees in the gutter a similarity with the “space that divides one sentence from the next: there is always a certain amount of information that is missing from the narrative” (2003: 9). Two other important devices give the language of comics vigour and consistency: the balloon and the caption. With its typical cloud-like shape, the former can be of two types, i.e. speech balloon and thought balloon, and is connected to the character by a tail, whose function is “equivalent to that of clauses” (Saraceni 2003: 9). Equally important is the employment of the caption, a tool able to support the narration by providing extra information, which Saraceni compares to the “background voice that sometimes is heard in films” (2003: 10). As we shall see, Sarnath Banerjee exploits *in toto* the fruitful dynamism of these textual characteristics in his works.

As far as the pictorial representation is concerned, Wolk (2007) makes a distinction between drawing and cartooning: the first term typically designates a process of ‘realistic’ representation based on technical aspects such as form, light, outlines, and so forth, whereas the second is connected with a kind of elaboration operating via the artist’s viewpoint and perception. Indeed, as Wolk holds, in the case of cartooning “its chief tools are distortion and symbolic abstraction; it usually begins and sometimes ends with contour and outline, and it relies on conventions that imply the progression of time” (2007: 120). To enhance the cartooning techniques, graphic novelists and artists rely on the employment of different signs, which are conventionally given certain meanings such as icons, indexes and symbols. The first category includes those signs that look like the object they wish to represent, the second concerns the elements that acquire a meaning depending on their environmental collocation, e.g. an arrow that indicates the way to a certain place, and finally the third regards the arbitrary assignment of values and meanings to signs, according to conventions, for example those regulating road signs.

## 2.2 A double pragmatic prospective

Given the structural and multimodal complexity of comics and graphic novels, I argue that a double approach to this genre is needed, taking into account, on the one hand, the process of text-production, and, on the other, the reception and translation of words and pictures. The assumption underlying the notion of text-production of graphic novels relates to the fact that the language of comics covers not only semantic, syntactic and rhetorical options, but also includes typographic,

pictographic and pictorial elements in the narrative construction. As graphic novelist Eisner affirms, “the process of writing for graphic narration concerns itself with the development of the concept, then the description of it and the construction of the narrative chain in order to translate it into imagery. The dialogue supports the imagery and pictures: both are in service to the story. They combine and emerge as a seamless whole” (2008: 113). Comics, therefore, are characterised by a mixture of different components, each playing a part in, and contributing to, the narration process (Saraceni 2001, Bridgeman 2004). The perspectives of the reception or translation of words and pictures are governed by the cognitive processes aimed at decoding signs and references, and Eco (2008) observes that the balloon can be regarded as an example of meta-language since it anchors the textual part to a specific code, with its inner rules.

However, Barker (1989) lays emphasis on the social aspect of reading graphic narratives in a dialogic approach through which readers reconstruct their own worlds and perceptions and try to find a balance between fiction and non-fiction. According to Barker, “conventions in comic strips condense social relations; they help to determine the kind of reader we become. They make reading a social relationship between us and the text” (1989: 11). In this perspective, we might interpret the semiotics of comics as a kind of visual semiotics, which textualises a particular type of linguistic landscape and consequently, at least to a certain extent, echoes the notion of geosemiotics, namely “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 2). This approach is further endorsed by Blommaert and Huang (2010) in their understanding of the localised specificity of signs in contexts and domains. By the same token, comics amplify their representational power and mirror the specific sociocultural local context they wish to represent in their grapho-textual nature: consequently Banerjee’s comics embody selected bits and pieces of Indian culture against a global cultural backdrop. To support this interpretation I shall use Pennycook’s concept of language as a local practice (2010), which calls attention to the linguistic and communicative phenomena that take place within and across communities to express identities.

## 2.2 Comics as a language of the youth?

The readership of comics is socially characterised as specific target groups, with two broad categories: stories for children, e.g. the characters created by Walt Disney, and comics for adults, as in the case of Banerjee. Furthermore, Wolk reminds us that, since “comics’ content and their social context are inextricably linked” (2007: 60), comics may be considered a peculiar and ‘alternative’ genre, or even as representative of a particular ‘subculture’ (e.g. young adults). As a whole, in fact, we could say that the language of comics draws on a variety of resources such as verbal play, non-standard vocabulary, lexical innovation, lingos and expressions, which in some cases may constitute a form of “antilanguage” (a concept originally elaborated by Halliday), often associated with the jargon of specific social groups and used as a form of social bonding. These ‘antilanguage properties’ of comics have often been exploited to tackle controversial issues or manifest discord and protest<sup>3</sup>.

In the Indian context, however, comics are not as widespread and popular as they are in the “western” world. Therefore one must be cautious in identifying comics as a possible linguistic code for young people. Certainly the emergence of the younger generation in India has strong influences

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<sup>3</sup> Titles such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (a graphic project which in reality was developed over a long span of time, i.e. 1972-1991), Alan Moore’s *V for Vendetta* (1982-1988) or more recently Magdy El Shafee’s *Metro* (originally published in Arabic in 2008 in Egypt) not only give literary prestige to the genre of comics, but they also function as political texts which embody discourses of commitment, resistance and reaction and deal with dramatic topics, for example the weight and the memory of the holocaust, the totalitarian threat of dystopia and the current instability of Arab contexts in northern Africa. In the Indian context it is worth mentioning the case of Amruta Pali’s *Kari* (2008), a graphic novel that explicitly addresses ‘scandalous’ and disturbing themes such as suicide, lesbian relations, terminal illnesses.

on communication and literacy, and implicitly on various forms of storytelling, and reflects once again the complex multilingual and multicultural environment of the country. In her analysis of the language of the youth in South Asia, Nair (2008: 474-479) recognises six particular strategies (clippings, inflectional and derivational suffixes, abbreviations and acronyms, neologisms, nonce formations, relexicalized items) and argues that they represent the sociolinguistic resources that young people exploit in order to affirm their identity and their sense of modernity, thus breaking the link with the traditions of the past. Indeed, the author holds that “the youth of India can both be seen publicly *performing* an innovative set of cross-cultural linguistic feats that will guarantee them an independent identity, as well as *forming* a linguistic vanguard in pursuit of ‘freedom of speech’ across international boundaries” (2008: 490; author’s emphasis).

If we now take into account the language of Indian comics, in particular the works of Banerjee, as a rule we do not find such special devices at work, at least not superficially, as the verbal elements employed tends to be levelled. However, the linguistic complexity of Banerjee’s works seems to adhere to the paradigms of representation and innovation that according to Nair characterise the particular socio-cultural context of the youth in contemporary India. The graphic novelist does not specifically direct his stories to a young readership, but he captures the vitality of the younger generations, in a context where, according to Nair (2008: 468) “increased lifespans and the institutions of the modern nation-state have combined to produce new social spaces within which the idea of youth, with a specialized culture of its own, has been psychologically extended and developed”. In this light, comics become a particular site for the expression of ‘in-progress’ identity, in which the emergence and contradictions of tradition and modernity are problematised and scrutinised via hybridity and imagination.

### 3. Sarnath Banerjee: a graphic storyteller in India

Born in 1972 in Kolkata, Sarnath Banerjee read Communication and Image at Goldsmith College, University of London, and then successfully focused on comics as a mirror for the representation of multifaceted scenarios of India. Indeed his works offer important insights into the social and cultural contexts of the country thanks to an eclectic and polymorphous style that breaks and rearranges storylines and plots in a postmodern fashion. Episodes, pictures, signs, references are elaborated and recoded into a flow of narrations, whose meanings are conveyed by the alliance of panels, gutters and balloons and must be cognitively deconstructed by the reader.

Ambitiously described as ‘India’s first graphic novel’ in various press reviews, *Corridor* presents different interconnected stories, nervously oscillating between Delhi and Kolkata, whose most extravagant characters are Brighu and Digital Dutta. The former is a young man with a craze for outlandish collections, including “rare LPs of forgotten musicians, whom I can’t listen to for the fear of scratching the record... nine leather-bound volumes of phantom – the ghost who walks, which I have stopped reading since Bambi borrowed volume four and never returned it” (Banerjee 2004: 5-6). Therefore he appears to evoke a postmodern identity, with a certain psychological maelstrom rendered through a rich intertextual technique, using both verbal language and significant drawings, also incorporating meta-reference to the genre of comics with the mention of Lee Falk’s *The Phantom*. Brighu, who does not hesitate to define himself as a postmodern Ibn Battuta, is textually constructed through the accumulation of explicit elements, symbols, quotations, and this type of characterisation is explicitly reinforced with a quotation of Jean Baudrillard on the pathological interpretation of collecting and materialism. Digital Dutta, a Kolkata-based software engineer whose visionary self is pictorially decomposed into a myriad of scenes and dreams, is also similarly portrayed: “in his head he is a faith healer, a quantum physicist, a war reporter, a linguist and a kalari expert. In his head he has danced with Isadora Duncan, played the guitar with Django Reinhardt, he has solved equations for Heisenberg, performed escape tricks with Harry Houdini, exploded the midfield alongside Garincha. In his head, he has been Chris Evert’s mixed-doubles

partner” (Banerjee 2004: 40-41). The two characters therefore exemplify the vigorous imagination of the author, exploring and manipulating the sense of identity of contemporaneity, and its (impossible) unity.

Banerjee’s second volume constitutes a further challenge to the idea of textual linearity as it brings to the highest degree the resource of intertextuality by simultaneously evoking various epochs, world settings, historical information and fictional events via explicit and hidden references. The first example of the intricate reference system governing the narrative worlds of the author lies in the title, which is the English translation of *Hatum Pyanchar Noksha*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali satirical novel by Kali Prasanna Singh (1862-4). The structure of *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers* presents a short prologue, followed by thirteen sections, which are collected under the title “The Dark Armpits of History” and whose stories recreate the legend of the wandering Jew: the main protagonist is given the task of recovering an eponymous book imbued with colonial narrations and shocking revelations. In his unusual quest, the man travels from London to Kolkata and unearths memories of his migrant family and ancestors. The graphic novel schizophrenically functions as a kind of intercultural *bricolage* grounded on the layering of various allusions, episodes, icons, and drawing extensively on several traditions.

Sarnath Banerjee’s latest work centripetally expands and fragments the very idea of graphic narrative into an experimental, hybridised plot-less text, which is not easy to define. Constructed as a series of interrelated sketches, strips, advertisements, pictures, the book is fictitiously presented as the final report of an imaginary institution called the Greater Harappa Rehabilitation, Reclamation and Redevelopment Commission, which aims to “conduct a gigantic survey of a country on the brink of great hormonal changes” (Banerjee 2011: 11). By building up a wealthy repository of genres and icons, the author fashions an interpolation of simple black-and-white pictures with no panels, descriptive or explanatory captions, graphic elements taken from the worlds of advertising and cinema with the purpose of scrutinising the tensions and anxieties of India today. The different “files” that make up the volume are organised as sorts of chapters, and their various titles often call to mind known personalities, manufactured goods or even educational acronyms, for example “Vicco” (an Ayurvedic medicine group) or “IIT” (Indian Institutes of Technology). Here the writer is not interested in a linear development of the content, but rather he seems to play deliberately with symbols and allusions because the “files are an examination of the near past and attempt to resurrect, examine and catalogue cultural, human and material relics” (Banerjee 2011: 15), hence the justification to mix colonial memories and contemporary uncertainties.

#### 4. Linguistic strategies in Banerjee’s graphic novels

##### 4.1 Language as a local practice between fiction and non-fiction

My approach to Banerjee’s multimodal texts is mainly grounded on the idea of language as a local practice, a dense notion used by Pennycook “to see how different linguistic resources are used, different worlds evoked, different possibilities engaged in as people use the linguistic wherewithal around them” (2010: 69). Such a perspective focuses on the ability of language users to link and represent simultaneously human activities, interactions and imaginations, in a communicative act that takes into account how local cultural manifestations construct the sense of locality. Pennycook deals with various contexts and genres, and emphasises the interconnection between locality and verbal message which ties individuals and communities in an ever-growing intertextual process, amplified by the rhymes of globalisation and its hybridised local and global repertoires.

I think it is possible to extend and apply such interpretative tools to various instances of language in use, including comics as representational resources for the expression of identity because the mixed (verbal/pictorial) languages that the graphic novelist uses can be seen as parts of a larger cultural patchwork. As Pennycook holds “landscapes are more than the environment in

which texts and images are drawn; they are spaces that are imagined and invented” (2010: 67), and consequently they can include those text-types that blend diverse localised modalities and references. Indeed, Banerjee’s works convey the values, contradictions and manifestations of the teeming Indian cultural scene, with its deep and puzzling identity constructions, echoing key concepts such as *rahtra* (nation), *lakshmi* (wealth) and *samaj* (society) (French 2011). Pennycook’s analysis is mainly addressed to non-literary genres, but it can be adapted to literary texts as well, as they too may be considered representational resources expressing a specific world vision. As Bex reminds us, “although it is true that literature does not refer directly to the phenomenal world, this is not to say that it does not refer indirectly. The concepts and propositions which are evoked by reading a literary text may not have specific correlations with items and relationships in the non-fictional world, but they enable us to create relatively rich imaginary cognitive worlds which mimic the external world” (1996: 183). However, if we broaden our perspective, we could argue that literary texts do not merely mediate the relationship between addresser and addressee in an attempt to represent reality, but they may work as ideal sites for the construction of identities and practices, though various semiotic resources, which are locally embedded and given appropriate meaning.

Banerjee’s graphic novels extensively employ an articulated assemblage of signs, including paralinguistic features such as advertisements, maps, photos, which function as examples of language as a local practice. These texts remix and reshape cultural references, colonial jargon, picture-supported wordplay, and other semiotic vehicles, in the urge to narrate, re-imagine, and examine reality and its multiple dimensions via new communicative channels. *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*, for example, opens with a warning which reads “This book is inspired by history but not limited by it” (Banerjee 2007: IV) and thus explicitly defines its ambitious and ironic scope. In the incipit of *The Harappa Files*, instead, the members of the Greater Harappa Rehabilitation, Reclamation & Redevelopment Commission chorally state that “to tell / new / stories / one / needs / new / languages” (Banerjee 2011: 12), and from such a provocative assertion emerge two fundamental aspects: the desire to stage identities and circumstances through stories, and the decision to manipulate or recreate codes (through new languages). In this way, the structure of the text adopts language as a local practice in an effort to express attitudes and feelings, and we should remember that the London-educated author appropriates and re-invents a non-autochthonous genre to scan a plurality of cultural contexts, for instance the ambivalent burden of the colonial past and the narrow path towards the future of India, and its many contemporary identities.

The idea of local practice can also refer to drawn images that reflect contextualised realities and contexts, whereas the graphological dimension here functions through the support of “visual English”, and further corroborates the localised viewpoint and identity introspection. According to Goodman (1996: 52) “the ways in which we represent events visually are linked to our point of view about those events, and what we want to communicate about them”. Consequently, the Indian author’s trilogy turns a lens on some crucial aspects of Indian culture and society and what emerges from this textual complexity does not concern a single form of identity, but rather a variety of multiple selves performing different acts and moving across various local contexts.

## 4.2 Deconstructing Banerjee’s comics

Although the three graphic narratives are constructed distinctively and through different techniques, they share some structural characteristics, which constitute Banerjee’s representational and linguistic resources in his ambitious project. The author’s idiolect mingles traditional multimodal vehicles triggering a defamiliarising and puzzling effect on the reader. Given the density of these graphic novels and the difficulties in reproducing the panels, in the following sections I will focus on some of the more salient features. It is important to bear in mind, however, that in comics such devices do not operate in isolation, but rather they make up a heterogeneity of semiotic elements, intermixing texts, photos, pictures and symbols in a textual organisation which

may superficially appear chaotic, but which actually condenses a multiplicity of conceptual frames and cultural discourses (Bridgeman 2004).

#### 4.2.1 Colouring

One of the first attention-getting elements in graphic stories is colouring, i.e. the fact that pictures, and sometimes even words, can be either black and white or coloured. Both techniques are important and add different connotations to the story: apparently black and white pictures look “simpler” than coloured pictures, but they can actually be highly expressive and bear symbolic references. From a mere quantitative point of view, we can see that in *Corridor* 20 pages out of 112 are, at least partially, coloured, whilst *The Barn Owls’ Wondrous Capers* presents 40, at least partially, coloured pages out of the total number of 263 pages. With *The Harappa Files*, the case is different as most of the pages are coloured, but this is due to its strongly iconic nature and to its proximity to other forms of representation such as advertising or photography. As Kress and Van Leeuwen affirm, in various representational forms and types “colour clearly functions as a formal semiotic device to provide cohesion and coherence; and this function is active across quite large spans” (2001: 58). Moreover, in this volume the majority of pictures are not framed into panels, but they occupy most of the space on the page.

Conversely the reason for adopting black-and-white almost exclusively in *Corridor* may lie in the writer’s experimental approach to the genre and his will to uphold a world tradition of black-and-white strips. However, it may also affect the salience of pictures and other elements, as shown, for example, in the final scene in which, through a meta-reference device, we see a hand drawing a panel in which there is a graphic artist at work (Banerjee 2004: 107), thus implying a continuous chain of inner references to the ideas of text-making and authoring (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Copyright © Sarnath Banerjee 2004**  
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2004, p. 107)

Therefore the black-and-white technique can also operate as a tool of expressive language employed to depict an alternative worldview, detached from the realistic principle of representation, bearing in mind that “there is more than one modality system often dependent on the context in which the image appears” (Goodman 1996: 59).

#### 4.2.2 Lettering

Lettering plays a significant part in the organisation of graphic stories as it vividly represents and marks the voice of the various characters, and can include devices as diverse as spelling, typography, visual alliteration, and visual puns. Eisner argues that in a graphic narrative “the style of lettering and the emulation of accents are the clues enabling the reader to read it with the emotional nuances the comics storyteller intended” (2008: 61). Whereas in *The Corridor* the writer chiefly uses block letters for all types of phrasing and texts, in the other two works he seems to favour letters that reproduce the effect of being “hand-

written”, often in italics, for direct speech contained in balloons and standard capital letter fonts for captions. The choice of hand-written letters and words suggests an embodiment and naturalness in the characters’ voicing, for example in the attempts of the narrator



in *The Barn Owls' Wondrous Capers* to come to terms with his upsetting past and distant memories as he rediscovers Kolkata (2007: 59) and discusses several issues with his new friend Digital Dutta (2007: 158). Elsewhere in the same volume, the change of typeface signals another type of communication, so, for example, the use of courier font is employed as the voice of a radio speaker (2007: 31) or for the cold formality of a school letter (2007: 42). In rarer cases, we encounter words written in Hindi, thus using the Devanagari alphabet (Banerjee 2004: 65), but often these forms of code-switching are used as captions for photos and pictures, further strengthening the collaboration of verbal and pictorial systems. Lettering does not merely have an aesthetic or evocative function, but it can also contribute to the representation of particular sound effects, for example via the mechanism of onomatopoeia (Terescenko 2010). As such it contributes to a communicative ensemble marked by what Goodman labels as “graphosemantics”, namely a notion which “looks not only at *what* is written, but at *how* it is written and at the relationship between the two” (1996: 44, author’s emphasis). Consequently, the written surface of the text simultaneously derives and transforms its meaning from the style adopted.

#### 4.2.3 The relationship between captions and speech

The relation between captions and direct speech usually works in tandem with the presence of pictures, but sometimes one element may be more marked than another: for example the text can function with pictures and captions only, or with absent or rare wording, as demonstrated in *The Harappa Files*, with its scarce presence of texts in balloons. Alternatively, the flow of narration can stem mainly from the representational power of pictures, without the support of descriptive or explicative captions. In such cases, to approach comics implies we need to infer meanings by decoding the multimodal combination of different signs and elements. As a result, “the reader is forced to participate by supplying unspoken dialogue. [...] Used often in films, this device has the effect of compressing a sequence which might otherwise lose rhythm and credulity” (Eisner 2008: 58). This strategy is extensively employed in *The Harappa Files*, which essentially emphasises its fragmented structure seen as a collection of drawings, words, symbols, which are linked together by invisible but strong cultural bonds to generate imagined identities (the meaning of ‘being Indian’) and homelands (India as a nation). Indeed, the book ambitiously tries to focus on the double representation of “post-liberalized India, a fast capitalising society that suffers from bipolar disorder” (Banerjee 2011: 15), and in such a suggestive label we find the twofold dimension of a country torn between the values of rooted tradition and the overwhelming and divisive force of modernity. The sense of identity is therefore mirrored in captions and speech in order to refer to local and national contexts, in a postmodern flow of meaning-construction. In this volume, the notable abundance of captions reinforces the semantic value of pictures showing various scenes, types and clichés of India, and contributes to the processes of identity construction and representations, which in a country such as India are necessarily plural and multicultural.

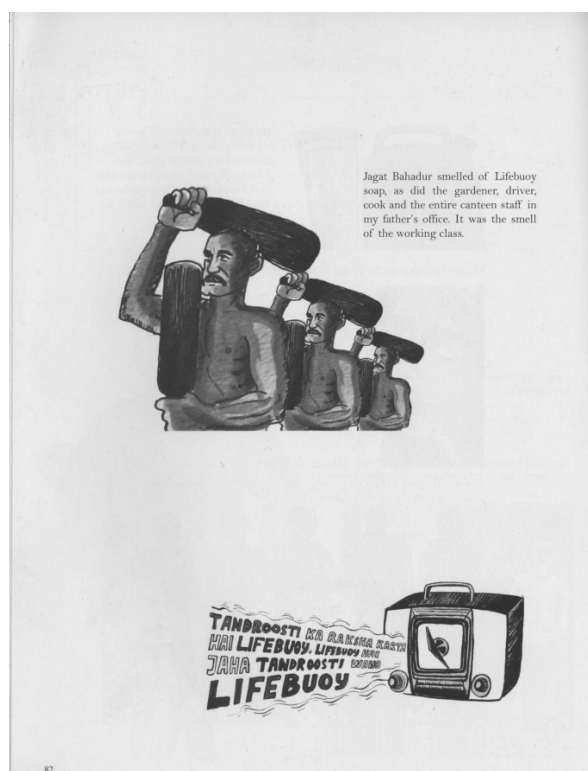
#### 4.2.4 The blend of pictures and photos

This mixing strategy notably testifies to the high degree of multimodality that operates in comics. The presence of colourful photos in *The Barn Owls' Wondrous Capers*, for instance illustrating different parts of Kolkata, such as its crowded ghats, the fish market, the office district of Dalhousie, or the numerous advertising pictures and logos, corroborate the textual surface of these narratives and semiotically exercise their visual power. We could here employ the two notions coined by Goodman (1996: 48-49), respectively labelled as ‘visual alliteration’ and ‘visual puns’. The first category can refer to a section of *The Harappa Files*, for example, which deals with different types of small businesses, and the idea of structural repetition is presented and reinforced

by a one-and-a-half page photograph of an Indian stationery and photocopy kiosk (Banerjee 2011: 174-175). We can find a visual pun on the well-known lazy Indian bureaucracy in an episode where a (drawn) Babu clerk explains the procedure of requiring some documents: “We can’t really do anything for you until you fill three forms – D6732 F, form 11B/section 28, Form 38C/71, Item 1016, each of which should bear recent passport-size photographs, duly signed by a class IV gazetted officer and bearing his official seal” (Banerjee 2007: 196). The verbose speech of the clerk is then combined with a photo of a mass of poorly kept yellowing files: thus the textual and photographic components of the panel mutually reinforce each other as a form of parody.

#### 4.2.5 Iconic advertising

The presence of photographic images calls to mind the use of iconic advertising, which witnesses cultural values and psychological perceptions. Advertising, for example, presented in various formats such as photos, logos, slogans, contextualises the narrative flow and provide an echoing effect by shifting between the language of fiction and non-fiction. We should however bear in mind that “images, unlike speech acts, cannot assert or deny anything, which means that the very notion of truthfulness appears slippery” (Pennarola 2003: 66). However, in some cases, the arbitrariness of the adverts used, which may generate connotative reactions of different types, is exploited so as to provoke the reader. If we consider *The Harappa Files*, we come across various popular Indian advertising references, such as a type of ointment or a soap brand. For example, Boroline, an over-the-counter antiseptic cream originally launched in 1929 in Kolkata by Gourmohan Dutta, a Bengali merchant, is suggested “for any cuts or bruises on the path to success...” (Banerjee 2011: 74), ironically hinting at discourses of national economic self-sufficiency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another item mentioned is the soap Lifebuoy, originally marketed by Level Brothers in England in 1895, but again used by the writer as a form of metonymy to clearly evoke social belonging as illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Copyright ©Sarnath Banerjee**  
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *The Harappa Files*,  
HarperCollins Publishers India, Noida, 2011, p. 82)

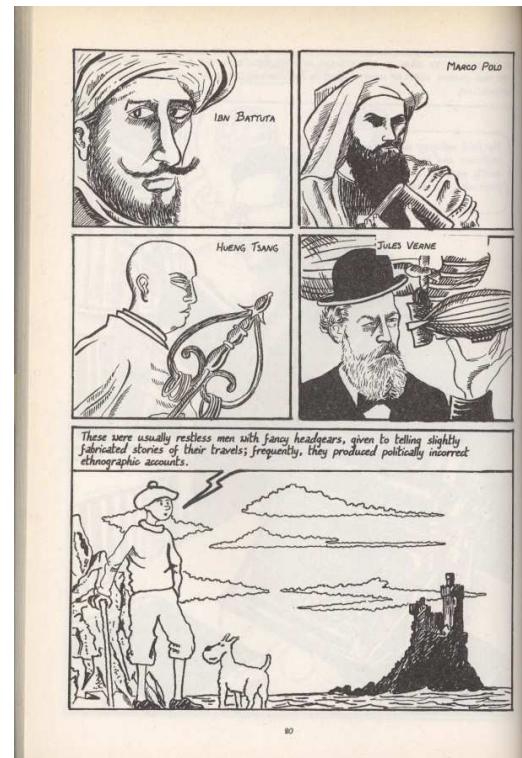
#### 4.2.6 Intertextuality

Banerjee’s graphic stories are grounded essentially on the key notion of intertextuality, “a term which continually refers to the impossibility of singularity, unity and thus of unquestionable authority” (Allen 2000: 209) and which operates as a growing, labyrinthine web of references, echoes, ideas, memories. All these stories with their corollary of sub-plots develop and multiply references and symbols, schizophrenically in balance between the colonial past and the post-colonial age, the legacy of tradition and the emergence of modernity. The most impressive use of intertextuality probably characterises *The Barn Owls’ Wondrous Capers*, which verbally and graphically mentions characters as diverse as Jacob Charnock, Marie-Antoinette, the count of St Germain, Anton Mesmer, Qazi Nazrul Islam, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, but also

meta-references to comics, with the presence of Tintin and his dog Snowy, created by Belgian writer

Hergé in 1929, as shown in Figure 3.

Intertextual references to popular culture appear in *Corridor* too through the pictures of Groucho Marx, Hitchcock and Houdini, while political icons such as Nasser and Che Guevara are shown in *The Harappa Files*. But this cultural overflowing allows the expansion of the textual scope through a circular movement in an intensely dialogic relation between the centre and the periphery of the world. As a consequence, the strategy of hybridised intertextuality affects stylistic and communicative modes and features. Blommaert defines this scenario as “translocalization”, in which “the spread of globalized cultural formats and the emergence of globalized communities of consumers thus create new, and positive, opportunities for languages to circulate – even if the languages are changed in the process” (2010: 78). The overwhelming intertextual structure that Banerjee elaborates therefore appropriates and abrogates icons and signs in a fluid manner, which attempts to record the contemporary cultural phenomena we observe in local and global contexts, and its manifold ‘pluralising’ effects.



**Figure 3: Copyright © Sarnath Banerjee**

(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2007, p. 80)

#### 4.2.7 Varieties and registers of language

The linguistic dimension will now be analysed with reference to languages, dialects, non-standard forms, obsolete speech and other tools. With the exception of some occasional instances of code-switching, for example in *Corridor* (Banerjee 2004: 65) when we encounter a “good habits” campaign poster with English and Hindi phrasing, it can be said that the author tends to conform to standard Indian English. However, the graphological potential of verbal elements is exploited to achieve specific stylistic effects such as reproducing old-fashioned, Victorian speech or representing modern, innovative slang. There are also instances of untranslated phrases and sentences, for example in Bengali when we encounter Mr Philip Francis, an 18<sup>th</sup> century British politician and pamphleteer of Irish origin (Banerjee 2007: 5). In other cases the language attempts to reproduce stylistically the geographical variation of English used in colonial and in modern India, for instance when it conveys specific diatopic items, such as non-standard jargons, with phatic fillers like “na” or loanwords from vernacular languages.

#### 4.3 Language transformation in post-colonial authors

Many recent studies have focused on the notion of language change operating in post-colonial writing. To some extent, the language of Banerjee’s graphic novels adheres to the principles of language transformation that occurs in post-colonial cultures (Ashcroft 2009), but here the idea itself of language is different as it combines verbal and non-verbal resources, blending together words and pictures. Thus, the imitation principle of iconicity that Short and Leech (1981: 233-236) employ to analyse literary texts is here enhanced by the graphic component, which makes the message being carried by the text simultaneously more transparent and more obscure, in the sense that apparently some drawings and characters may appear easily decipherable and transparent from a cognitive viewpoint, but at a closer look they encapsulate a feeling of multiplicity and complexity.

Ashcroft's perspective is mainly based on the discrepancy between the global use of English and the local reinvention of the code in post-colonial contexts. According to him, such tension is not an oppositional force, but rather it demonstrates the strength of the creative artist, who appropriates and elaborates linguistic structures to carry specific local meanings: "this difference from a norm is the very thing that allows language itself to be the metonymy, the most important signifier of cultural difference itself" (2010: 112). Hence, we can see that when language is hybridised and manipulated it ultimately becomes a powerful medium for the expression of identity. Ashcroft also takes into consideration different strategies for the transformation of language (e.g. glossing, untranslated words, interlanguage, syntactic fusion, code-switching and vernacular transcription), but what is significant concerns the dynamic nature of language change as mirrored by textual representations and the capacity of writers to constantly innovate linguistic schemes to tailor new need of self-expression. Thus, in Ashcroft's vision (2009: 175, author's emphasis), the post-colonial writer "concedes the importance of *meanability*, the importance of a situation in which meaning can occur, and at the same time signifies areas of difference which may lie beyond meaning, so to speak, in a realm of cultural experience". This vision holds true in the case of Banerjee's graphic novels, whose language manipulation aims to the representation of identity.

To a certain extent, Ashcroft's analysis is close to the idea of language as a local practice, as Pennycook encourages to "consider the relocalization of different practices in language and the translingual practices of language users drawing on different resources" (2010: 86). In looking at different forms of textualities and media, the scholar constantly highlights the centripetal processes of transformation of communicative codes which impact on other social contexts as well. Moreover, when he examines the global dimension of English today, with its political and cultural implications, he provokingly emphasises what he calls the 'worldliness' of English, a notion that relates "both to its local and global position, to the ways in which it both reflects social relations and constitutes social relations" (Pennycook 2010: 79).

The linguistic environment that emerges from Banerjee's works can thus be observed in the light of both Ashcroft's and Pennycook's analysis, since it eventually reflects complex, multiple dimensions of cultural phenomena in the globalised, post-colonial and postmodern world, with its plethora of questions and forms of crisis, in which different characters, such as collectors of eccentricities, IIT students, old-fashioned babus, and 'reinvented' heroes, enact and reinterpret narrations through imaginative storytelling with both verbal and pictorial repertoires. Banerjee translates the notion of worldliness into texts which graphically and verbally compress its meanings and references to reveal aspects of Indian identity. In fact, the close collaboration of pictures and words allows the author to explore the feeling of uncertainty that affects modern life, its frenetic rhythms and its peculiar habits, which of course derive from the specific sociocultural and sociohistorical frame of India.

## 5. The (Multi)Canon of identity and its linguistic constructions

How does language reflect or rather 'create' the sense of 'identity', a loaded umbrella term that encompasses various definitions and concepts? Of course there are no univocal, clear-cut answers to this question and the very notion of identity calls for debates and arguments from various viewpoints (Jenkins 2004), but we should remember the intimate connection between language and identity, which, as such, also surfaces in the texts here considered through a variety of linguistic devices and drawn pictures. Their representational power to a large extent conveys a specific inner perspective mirroring individual and collective values and practices. It is certainly not easy to disentangle the labyrinthine narrative and multimodal patterns that Banerjee develops in his works, but as a whole they constitute both a single and a plural vision of contemporary life and history through 'authentic' Indian eyes, ambitiously adding the numerous historical layers that postmodern and post-colonial narratives tends to disclose and remix today. On the one hand, they

try to reproduce a specific sociocultural milieu, namely India, and, on the other, they convey the author's peculiar choices and inclinations.

In other words, to approach language and identity as expressed in Banerjee's comics we need to consider the idea of multi-canon, or canon expansions (in this case the extension of a specific genre appropriated and abrogated, i.e. 'made local') and the subsequent creation of multi-canons (so as to accommodate various linguistic and textual styles, resources, characteristics), which by virtue of divergence and convergence also affect the dimension of the English language in its double role both as a global language and a local language. Kachru (2009: 182) has argued that "multi-canons in English have symbolic and substrative meaning: symbolic in the sense that one's identity is symbolic, and substrative in the way identity is expressed, articulated, negotiated and preserved in language". From this perspective, we could assume that given the complexity of modern identity (in India and in the world) it is necessary for a storyteller to widen and reinvent languages in order to create a hybrid, "multi-canonical" system that integrates different communicative codes such as Indian English, cultural references, the interplay between verbal and visual components, multimodality and paratextual elements too. It is in the combination and blending of such features that lie the various aspects of identity and culture that Banerjee wishes to spotlight: India and Indian society therefore are constructed and deconstructed in an effort to understand the present through the window of the past (e.g. the pictorial representation of Kolkata, which used to be the capital city during the Raj). Consequently, India as an emerging super-power, with its deep contradictions and social problems, cannot be fully understood if we fail to look at its history. But we should also consider future perspectives, as Banerjee's macro- and micro- stories display characters, events and attitudes that collectively constitute the social tissue of an evolving context, in the globalisation process of South Asia.

In these texts, the range of possible identity manifestations include expectations, desires, anxieties that subjects perceive and project in several spheres and acts: Banerjee captures and remoulds these feelings in his graphic storytelling, either directly with words and pictures, or by activating references, echoes, symbols. However, what characterises his comics is a particular perspective that reflects the interconnectedness of discourses, identities and voices via the 'localised' realisations of intertextuality and communication. Such a viewpoint is also in line with recent research work on the notion(s) of identity and its multiple declinations as illustrated by Iedema and Caldas-Coulthard in their treatment of 'identity trouble', in which they acknowledge the cultural and historical processes of disaggregation affecting modern history and also affirm that "speaking of identity makes it possible to acknowledge that we are criss-crossed with meanings, resources, feelings and regimes of being that reference a multitude of others, other places, other times and other practices" (2008: 4). To fully understand such a comprehensive gaze, we have to take into account the mutual interchange of the local (Indian values and symbols) and the global (graphic storytelling and the use of English). Eventually we come full circle to Pennycook's vision of language as a local practice, which, in the case of these graphic works, can suggest the flavour of Indianness. This appears to be torn between the poles of globalised worldliness and specific locality, but Pennycook points out that "what is global, part of the very one-ness of the world, can only be understood through the locality of perspective, in a way that includes the standpoints, the worldview, the local articulations through which the global occurs" (2010: 79-80). Hence, the scholar proposes a more holistic approach by highlighting how subjects make up their identities by moving between local and global dimensions in productive processes of transformation and change.

## 6. Conclusion: identity in local practices

The degree of transparency of the language of the comics for Banerjee, however, may be challenging and lead to a kind of paradox, because to decode the multimodal structure of these texts we need to deconstruct various cultural layers – expressed by both verbal and pictographic media –

joined together in the textual arrangement. The author indeed plays with the balance between preciseness and opaqueness with the two types of information (written words and drawn images) that, through the mechanisms of cohesion and coherence, work as texts. When the story lacks explicit information or recurs to an introspective, hermetic style, this probably represents a provocation of the graphic novelist who challenges the readers to decode multiple signs and references, bearing in mind that “the process of identity construction does not reside within the individual but in intersubjective relations of sameness and difference, realness and fakeness, power and disempowerment” (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 27). Such dichotomies make up the scenario of interaction between different subjects operating in and reshaping a world ‘in transition’ – i.e. the perennial clashes of time-honoured and technologically-advanced Indias – that we may locate in these graphic novels and their representations.

As we have seen, the sense of identity that emerges from Banerjee’s graphic narratives is also marked by hybridity, i.e. the permutation of different cultural expressions in new and suggestive ways, mingling different languages and media, traditions and innovations. Banerjee’s idiosyncratic style is highly hybridised on both the verbal and visual levels: the former concerns the distribution of lexical items from different languages and historical periods (e.g. the Boxwallah English of the pre-Raj time astutely recreated in *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*) whereas the latter relates to the mixed use of stereotyped graphic representations of Indian people, the presence of colours and black and white, the juxtaposition of photos and pictures. Not only does hybridity function as an ideal tool to illustrate of the Indian context, but it also provides density of information and meaning compression through attention-grabbing devices, whilst characters such as Brighu, Shintu, Digital Dutta, Kedar Babu and Mandar Dey move between teeming worlds, break the constrain of panels and trim a wealth of intertwined subplots.

In this light, Banerjee’s heteroglossic works can also be considered as novel, complex examples of Indianness, a cultural category that relies on the multiplicity of cultures, voices, heritages, frictions. Indeed these graphic novels convey a traditional sense of unity, of life developing in and through cycles, which is a largely Indian perspective, simultaneously intermixing and affecting fundamental cultural components. They also depict signs of crisis – affecting society, men and traditions – but eventually manage to reconcile forms of identity and forms of crisis, fractures and disintegrations in an effort to come to terms with life in India today, a vision which cannot forget its traditional and colonial pasts. Indeed, graphic novels constitute apt vehicles not only for the representation of contemporary seminal issues (such as the position of the individual in society, the constraints of gender, the social oppositions of inclusion and exclusion), but thanks to their appealing interplay of different characteristics they seem to have an effecting power to challenge and encourage dialogue and reflection as they activate cognitive and intercultural mechanisms of perception and elaboration.

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